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ABSTRACT

Elementary principals are encouraged to take active roles in furthering the "right-to-read" effort. Because they are in positions which allow them to determine school character and activities, they should provide leadership within their communities and contribute to the national effort. The establishment of federal offices to administer the "right-to-read" program will provide a central organization. Beyond it, individual schools should work through parent organizations, volunteer programs, etc. to increase literacy among children. Suggestions for increasing libraries, improving instruction, and creating parental involvement are given.

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THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN ACHIEVING THE RIGHT TO READ GOAL

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Address by James E. Allen, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Education
and
U.S. Commissioner of Education

It would be a privilege and a pleasure for me to participate in any meeting of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, but it is particularly satisfying to be present at this meeting because of the subject on which you have asked me to speak.

The Right to Read effort is a commitment that is central to my hopes for achieving true equality of educational opportunity in America, and I read into the title you have assigned me -- "The Role of the Elementary School Principal in Achieving the Right to Read Goal" -- an equal commitment on your part. I hope this to be true because certainly your enthusiastic support is essential.

Your responsibility as elementary school principals encompasses those years in education during which the reading skill is established. The measure of reading success, indeed of the total success, of a school lies largely in your hands, for no other person so directly determines the character and quality of the life of a school -- the day-by-day activities that shape the learning and mold the destinies of children. As the Right to Read effort takes shape you will inevitably be at its heart.

Before the National Association of Elementary School Principals Annual Convention, General Session, Civic Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Sunday, April 19, 1970, 8:15 p.m.

In order to formulate plans that hold the promise of success in achieving the Right to Read goal it is essential to recognize the situation in which education now finds itself.

For some years now we have been in a period when we have been indulging ourselves in speculation about change in education -- a rather pleasant period in a sense, when it was possible to enjoy the excitement of an atmosphere of newness without plunging into the manifold difficulties, the struggle, of making change a reality in our educational system. Of course, change has taken place, but not even the most optimistic advocate can assert that it has been either of sufficient degree or of the basic nature required.

This period of somnolence is fast ending; first, because of the sheer pressure of the need; second, because of the growing readiness of the profession to accept and promote change; and finally -- and perhaps most significantly -- because of a new tougher attitude toward education that increasingly emphasizes accountability, and refuses to accept promises, demanding performance.

What the future holds, I believe, i. a recasting of the entire educational system in the United States, in line with new perspectives on our national purposes. The challenges fall on everyone from the President and the Congress through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Office of Education, to every part of the vast complex of organizations and activities that make up education in America.

The real opportunity that now exists to change our schools adds excitement and promise to the role of the principal, for, in his position of direct influence, the school principal is a major factor in determining whether change in education is to be an amorphous, never-never kind of thing, happening somewhere out there, or whether it is to be a present reality in his own school, part of the day-by-day experience of the students.

I would hope, therefore, that the elementary school principals would be leaders in actively seeking change, open to new ideas and attuned to the necessity for flexibility in all approaches to the provision of educational opportunity.

Flexibility is the keynote to the kind of change coming. Heretofore, the changes we have sought have been largely within the existing educational structure. Now we seek a broader interpretation of education that discards rigid structuring for a freer adaptation to differing needs and goals -- an interpretation that acknowledges learning as a life-time process and sees the schools as a flexible social instrument reaching beyond the classroom and encompassing the total learning possibilities and resources of the entire environment and social structure.

This seeking for fundamental change and reform is reflected in the four-point program of action recently set forth in the President's Message on Education. These points are:

1. That the Congress create a National Institute of Education as a focus for a more coherent national approach to educational research and experimentation.

This Institute would seek to develop new departures in teaching and learning, to link the processes of educational reform and improvement to the needs of the practitioners and decision makers, and to provide technical assistance to State and local agencies seeking to evaluate their programs and to update their methods.

Conferences with leading researchers in the sciences, the social sciences and in education, as well as with school board members, administrators, teachers, and other practitioners, on how best to organize and staff this Institute have already begun.

I shall soon announce the appointment of a planning staff to help in this regard. Congressional hearings on the Administration's bill (H.R. 16235, S. 3531) for the National Institute of Education are expected to begin in a few weeks and I hope that the National Association of Elementary School Principals will give its influential support to the enactment of this highly important legislation.

2. That a President's Commission on School Finance be established to analyze the fiscal plight of our elementary and secondary schools and to make proposals for modernizing and stabilizing our inadequate, inequitable, inflexible and highly undependable system of financing public education.

The President has named Mr. Neil McElroy, Chairman of the Board of Procter & Gamble, a distinguished American, and a man with a long record of deep interest in public education, as Chairman of the Commission.

I need not emphasize to this audience the importance of this Commission. You are well aware of the limitations of the present arrangements for school support as you experience the difficulties of administration that arise in trying to operate schools under conditions of, on the one hand, increasing demands and rising costs, and on the other, of limited income and growing taxpayer resistance. The need is not only for more money, but for a fiscal plan which provides the money when and where it is most needed.

Here let me say, as I have said before, that increased support for education cannot be postponed and that I shall persist in my efforts to gain for education the higher priority at the Federal level which will bring a larger share of available funds.

2. That the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Office of Economic Opportunity jointly establish a network of experimental centers to discover what works best in early childhood education.

Child psychologists have long known that the first five years in a child's life are crucial in the development of intelligence -- that as much of that development takes place in these beginning years as in the next thirteen. Yet, for the most part, society has ignored this fact in its provision for public education, assuming no responsibility until nearly the end of this crucial period.

The far-reaching results of this neglect have been so clearly revealed by the increased attention given in recent years to counteracting the effects of deprivation that we can no longer ignore the need for bringing these early childhood years into the realm of public education's responsibility. For the elementary school principal this expansion of his responsibility -- likely to include children as young as three years -- probably will be the highlight of the 70's. Your job will certainly not be made any easier by this venture into new and extremely sensitive and critical areas of education but it will surely be more satisfying, for you will be able to serve many more children more suitably and successfully.

4. Now I come to the fourth point in the President's Message, the point of special interest tonight, namely, that the nationwide Right to Read goal for the Seventies, proclaimed by me last Fall, be given the highest priority at every governmental level of our educational system.

This goal calls for the assurance that by the end of this decade no boy or girl shall be leaving our schools without having acquired the skill and the desire to read to the full limits of his capability.

It is inexcusable that in this day when man has achieved such giant steps in the development of his potential, when many of his accomplishments approach the miraculous, there should be those who cannot read.

- One out of every four eleven-year-old children in the United States reads at or below the level of an average nine-year-old child.
- Twelve percent of the nine-year-olds read at or below the level of the average seven-year-old.
- Seven million public school pupils (16 percent of the enrollment in grades 1-12) require special instruction in reading.
- In those of the Nation's large city public schools in which at least half of the pupils come from poor homes, almost one-fourth of the elementary and more than forty percent of the secondary pupils require special instruction in reading.
- There are more than three million adults (14 years or older) unable to read and write a simple message in English or in any other language.

While the achievement of the Right to Read goal is the responsibility of many groups, public and private -- indeed of all citizens -- it is the special and direct responsibility of elementary school principals.

The Right to Read for the children of America will be achieved in your domain. It is in the years when children are in the primary school that the leap into literacy happens -- or doesn't happen -- and we all know that the most earnest and expensive remedial efforts can seldom fully compensate for early failure.

The Right to Read effort offers you an opportunity to help to erase this shameful failure which for too long has been allowed to weaken our education system and to deprive millions of the possession of the skill of reading -- a skill necessary to all other areas of learning and a fundamental educational right.

Literacy -- the ability to read -- divides the cultural "haves" from the "have nots" and is as formidable a dividing line today as it was when social castes were arranged in far more rigid hierarchies than now. It is the literate who acquire the skills to do the jobs that satisfy personal aspirations and sustain society. It is as simple as that -- and as complex.

For a technological age, reading is a survival skill, not a luxury. Even the smallest children need to recognize labels, signs on streets, bus signs, and any number of other urgent messages. Growing up, it will soon be equally necessary for them to be reading drivers' manuals, leases, employment forms and tax blanks. This is reading in the practical, down-to-earth sense, but the person who can not do it is, in effect, outside the culture, a dropout from society itself.

Unless we can make sure that no child passes through our schools without achieving true literacy, the new, broader programs we seek in education and new departures in the larger society will be endangered. Environmental/ecological education, international education, career education -- are inaccessible to the person who can not read. The increased participation in community governing processes among the poor -- the development of new economic institutions by and for the poor -- are all dependent upon literacy.

There is no question, then, that there is need for a massive attack on reading deficiencies, nor that you are in a strategic position for leading this attack. I would not be so presumptuous, however, as to assume that I could, or should, tell you how to exercise your role in this massive effort. By training and experience you are prepared to lead. But in order to arrive at a mutual understanding of the nature and the scope of the effort we are undertaking, I would like to present a few ideas about procedures.

Inevitably it seems that the initial reaction to questions about reading is to discuss methods. Methods, of course, are important, but it is the results that matter, and one of your most important contributions will be to see that the Right to Read effort does not become bogged down in debates over method.

Fortunately, we are becoming more sophisticated about what is involved in learning to read, looking beyond mechanical considerations, to factors involved in cultural conditioning and individual psychology. We know that motivation is immensely important; that the value priorities of a given social group are highly influential; and that more attention is necessary to the physical structures and neurological patterns which may be responsible for success or failure in mastering the printed word.

There are many exciting new developments in the reading field with which I am sure you are familiar and will be discussing in your "Consultant Centers" and "Ideas to Action" seminars. The TV program "Sesame Street", for example, is giving us dramatic evidence of the extent to which the picture can be the way to the word. The next series of "Sesame Street" programs, recently announced and supported by another grant from the Office of Education, as well as by grants from other public and private sources, will have increased emphasis on reading. Through the national Right to Read effort, other equally effective approaches will be encouraged.

I would urge that you be alert to all of these resources of experimental character and flexible about methods and techniques.

At the same time I would urge that you be sure that traditional resources are well chosen and well used. An example of this need can be found in our libraries. First of all, every primary school should have a well-stocked library of its own or, certainly, ready access to one. It is unfortunately all too often true, however, that even where libraries exist, the books and related material are not well chosen. They are out of date, badly put together, or simply uninteresting. It is no wonder that many children are turned off reading!

The public schools have exercised a kind of censorship function in relation to reading matter, specifying certain items acceptable by middle class standards of "high culture" and social decorum, and proscribing everything else. In this day and age, choosing appropriate reading materials for children sometimes requires unorthodox approaches, even to suspending, at least temporarily, traditional prejudices against comic books, movie magazines, even commercials and advertisements.

It should not be forgotten that once the skill has been acquired, the way is open to guide tastes in using it. I am not suggesting opening the school to printed matter without regard to its contents, or giving up the important aim of instilling an appreciation of good literature. I am saying, rather, that there must be a recognition of reading materials outside these norms as having their uses.

Another area that must receive increased attention in attacking reading deficiencies is that of parent and community cooperation. It is more and more clearly recognized that a major factor in reading failure can be the home and neighborhood environment. It is urgent then that the psycho-cultural barriers, which, for the poor at least, divide the school from the home and community be broken down. The elementary school principal can bolster the efforts of the school by helping to build bridges between home and school. This can be done in a variety of ways -- through PTA's and other school-oriented groups, through home visitations -- but it is essential that parents have information,

skills, source materials and ideas to make them capable and desirous of making reading an integral part of the life of the young child in the home.

The principal can further bolster the efforts of the school by marshaling the total resources of the community. These resources include of course local government agencies, civic and religious groups, public libraries, museums, galleries, higher education institutions, and so on, and perhaps of even greatest importance, the great body of volunteers. The Right to Read project is a natural for volunteer participation and the school should not only be open to volunteers but should actively seek them out.

Besides enlisting parent and volunteer cooperation, the principal can further the cause of reading by tapping the resources of the student body -- older children helping younger ones, and students from higher levels of education coming into the lower grades as volunteer aides. In this connection, I am pleased to announce that, at the request of the Office of Education, the administrators of the National Neighborhood Youth Corps program in the Department of Labor have set aside several thousand of their summer job opportunities to be used for tutoring in reading. This program is under the direction of the Education Professions Development Bureau in the Office of Education.

As professionals you of course recognize the importance of intensive in-service training of teachers, the use of reading specialists, and the introduction of the most up-to-date methods

of diagnosis and evaluation in analyzing reading progress and problems. And you will, I am sure, include attention to these in your concern with the Right to Read effort. The one item I wish to stress in connection with reading instruction is the amount of time devoted to it. I would urge that a fresh look be given to the place and priority of reading in the curriculum in the beginning school years. It may well be that for many children instruction in other subjects will have to be assigned a lower priority until they have mastered the skill of reading at the level expected.

Your professional responsibility in the Right to Read effort goes beyond the specific actions you may take, to the creation, in the school, the home, and the community, of a climate of thought and feeling that sees reading as important. If the principal and the teachers are people who, privately and personally, as well as publicly and professionally, value reading, their sense of the satisfaction of reading will communicate itself along with what they are trying to convey about its utility.

To try to mobilize all the nationwide resources available, a National Reading Council is being established and its members will soon be announced by the President. Mrs. Nixon, deeply interested in education and a strong proponent of volunteerism, will be honorary chairman. The Council, which will advise the Office of Education and other Government agencies on priorities in the Right to Read effort, will include representatives of the education profession, government, labor, business and industry,

the scientific community, foundations, youth groups, religious organizations, communications media, and the arts -- a cross-section of the shapers and movers of our society.

The operating arm of the National Reading Council will be the National Reading Center, which will be set up with Federal funds but outside the official structure of Government agencies. It will be chiefly a coordinating body -- a clearinghouse for information, old and new, an instrument for marshaling public support behind the reading effort, and a training center for the citizen volunteer who wants to contribute.

Obviously, to achieve our goal before the end of this decade will require both a realignment of present available funds in the local school budget and substantial new funds. I am working to ensure that a proper Federal share will be included in the Office of Education budget now being prepared for consideration at the next session of the Congress.

In conclusion then, may I say once again that I am heartened by your recognition of/centrality of your role in the achievement of the Right to Read goal. I should like also to congratulate you on the sense of innovativeness and freshness that is revealed in your program for this meeting. This combination of commitment and sensitivity to the need for change augers well for the exercise of the potential of your positions as principals in taking full

advantage of the real opportunity that now exists to change our schools and make them truly effective instruments for the provision of equal educational opportunity in our country.
